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ABSTRACT

The availability of 72 inexpensive (50 cents each) still cameras and 200 rolls of film (19 cents per roll) to 70 English teachers in Frederick County, Maryland, has provided the means of stimulating students to expand their understanding of the environment and to sharpen their communicative talents. Projects undertaken include the students' use of these cameras for (1) exploring (while studying a media unit) the effect of pictures in investigating a subject and imparting information; (2) illustrating research papers; (3) describing a process (i.e., how to clean a gun) without using words; and (4) making a college of photographs and magazine cutouts to describe their families, their friends, or themselves. (JMC)

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The Simple Camera and The Teacher of English

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Visual literacy has been an educational goal for many years in Frederick County. Here Mr. Lewis gives an account of the promising relationship between the simple camera and the English teacher.

WHAT IF YOU could have, for your use in the classroom, 40 Canon TL single lens reflex 35mm cameras, a relatively unlimited supply of Kodak Tri-X Pan black and white film, and help in the cost of developing the film? Would you be able to develop activities employing these things for your English students which would improve their language arts skills? Could you come up with some ideas and experiences which would allow the students in your classroom to expand their understanding of their environment and sharpen their communicative talents?

I

Well, I imagine you do not have any such equipment available to you and, let me hasten to add, neither do the teachers of English in Frederick County (there is, in fact one Canon TL camera for use by the 70 teachers of English in our county). Nor are there plans in the offing in our county, or, I imagine, yours, for the purchase of such equipment. However, there is available to teachers of English in Frederick County equipment, supplies, and assistance which allow them to do most of the things with their students that a teacher equipped with sophisticated cameras and quality film could accomplish, and at a cost that is within the reach of the least well-endowed school system in Maryland, and perhaps any system in our country.

Perhaps this can be better explained if one understands that here in our county, we have been interested for quite a while in film study. In the last few months, we have developed this interest to include some curriculum study materials in this area, as well as the nucleus of a "film package" of short films (titles like "The Critic", "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", "The Hat", "The Top", and quite a few more) which seem to lend themselves to

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this area of study, as well as some funds to facilitate rental of other short films, as well as feature films. We have also bought a number of super 8mm motion picture cameras ranging from a sophisticated Bolex "Macrozoom" to a very easy-to-operate Kodak M12 in order to facilitate student filmmaking. However, still photography hadn't received much of our attention. Perhaps that interest would still be in the future if it weren't for a cereal box top.

The idea had its beginnings, at least with me, when my six-year-old son Tony received a "Clicker" camera for which he had submitted five cereal box tops.(Tony is an inveterate collector of box tops and has in the past received a moon-man launcher, five magic tricks guaranteed to astound your friends, and three drinking straws that, stretched out, are as long as your arm.) As trophies of my years as a yearbook and newspaper advisor in high school, I have multiple scars and an interest in photography. When I examined the camera he had received, I was impressed by the quality of its construction. I was also impressed later by the quality of the snapshots he was able to take with that simple box camera.

II

However, no incisive flashes occurred to me as to how all this was applicable to high school English until I saw in a magazine a picture essay about a teacher who had used such a camera with his own pre-school children, having them photograph and talk about their friends, family, and surroundings. I began to have a glimmer that the idea might hold some potential for English teachers.

I then wrote to a specialty house in Philadelphia which I discovered handled such a camera and at a price that might be interesting. I was surprised to learn by return mail that they did indeed handle a camera comparable to the "Clicker" my son had received and that their price, in lots of 72, was 50c per camera. I was further pleased to find that their film was to be had for 19c per roll, in packages of 100.

Power Sales, of Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, also included samples of their camera and film, which I immediately put to the test. I discovered that, under a variety of conditions, the "Diana" camera could take quite good snapshots in black and white (color film is available at a higher cost) in natural light, and that, without artificial light, it was possible to take acceptable pictures indoors. (The "Diana" is available with flash attachment at a higher cost.)

III

I then found myself aware of the fact that a camera and film of

acceptable quality were available, and at a price that was within the reach of my budget.

I was still far from sure how they could be used in the classroom, but after just a little thinking and a great deal of questioning, these possible uses, mainly centered around composition activities, presented themselves:

- to illustrate writing
- to produce picture/essays
- to create "live" comic strips
- to tell about one's family, pets, friends through pictures
- to collect data for research – such as pictures of effects of pollution, slums, highway hazards, school maintenance
- to describe a process or sequence through a series of photographs, perhaps with captions
- to be part of a media unit
- to take pictures, another form of communication

After examining the equipment and its cost, exploring its uses in the classroom, and experimenting with some of them myself, I decided it was useful, and educationally sound, for Frederick County schools to use the still camera in the classroom, and that it was worth the investment of our money.

Our first order was for 72 cameras and 200 rolls of film. Upon receipt of this order, I informed the teachers of English that these things were at their disposal and could be had for the asking. I informed them I would pay for the cost of film developing (approximately 90c per 16 frame roll) if their students could not, but that when students could absorb the cost they should.

The response was immediate and encouraging. Many teachers borrowed the cameras and put them in the hands of their students almost immediately.

One teacher at a large team-teaching school was about to embark on a media unit, involving motion pictures, television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, when the cameras became available. He borrowed 25 cameras and 50 rolls of film and had his students, in groups of 3-5 and under his direction, use the cameras in a free style in order to explore the effect of pictures in investigating subjects and imparting information. The results were mixed, but encouraging enough to cause him to be planning a similar project with another group, correcting some of the mistakes which were made the first time around.

Another teacher assigned cameras to individual students and had them take pictures to illustrate the research papers they were in the process of writing.

Still another teacher had students make a collage of magazine cutouts and "Diana" photographs to describe their families, their friends, or themselves.

A junior high school teacher used the cameras to help his students describe a process, such as how to clean a gun, without the use of words.

At present, there are a number of teachers involved in using the "Diana" cameras, employing some of the suggestions already mentioned, and with the help of their students, coming up with some new ideas.

What has been the response from students? Everything from, "I'm not going to do anything with this child's toy" to "This is the most exciting assignment I have ever had." I overheard one pretty freshman girl remark, "This is one of the few times I've ever really had fun in an English class." Perhaps that last consideration deserves as much of our attention in determining whether we continue this, or any other, project as anything else.

Thus far in Frederick County, we have the beginnings of a program that lends itself to the teaching of visual literacy. It is surely not all-encompassing or all-inclusive, and a great deal of further development must be done before it is anything like a finished product. But it serves a county of 70 teachers of English and about 7,000 secondary students for a cost that hasn't yet exceeded $150.00. And it's a start.

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